ALISA ANH KOTMAIR

Artist Statement

My practice spans artistic production, curatorial work, and the editing of text and image. At its core is an ongoing investigation into diaspora, generational rupture, and the precarious labor of cultural translation. As the daughter of a Vietnamese mother and a US-American father – profoundly shaped by the impacts of the Vietnam War – and as a migrant of color living in Germany since 1994, I approach translation not as a neutral transfer of information, but as a performative act. In my work, no “original” or archival document is treated as absolute; rather, they are unstable sites, constantly overwritten by history, memory, and the projections of the majority society.

My work also traces how allegiances, roles, and identities shift – the observer who is also observed, the translator who is also translated. Dance and movement training run underneath this as a language I set aside for video and text, and am now bringing back into it through archival material and performative reenactment. The work is not glossy; it lives in friction, at the faultlines where communication and translation fail.

For over a decade, I stepped back from active artistic production to raise two children and carry primary financial responsibility for my family. Working throughout this period as a writer and editor in architecture and design discourse sharpened my analytical eye for how spatial and institutional structures produce and control narratives – including narratives about people like me. Now I resume artistic production, carrying that eye into questions that have been accumulating long enough to demand form.

Those questions center on myth-making within the diaspora: how incompatible versions of the same history travel between generations, how family rumor functions as unofficial archive, and how diasporic bodies and histories are produced and contested through inherited or imposed scripts. Long Live Tourism!, begun in the late 1990s, was an early expression of this – and it continues to inform *Tracing Kiều*, a discursive and curatorial initiative that uses the 19th-century epic *Truyện Kiều*, Vietnam’s defining literary work, to activate creative exchange across its diaspora.

VITA / Lebenslauf *see also* alisakotmair.com/art-film

CURRENT PROJECTS

Sept–Dec. 2026	Recherchestipendium Bildende Kunst research grant to develop the work "Broadcast Bodies."
2025–present	"Tracing Kiều." Independent collective initiative at the intersection of Vietnamese diaspora, contemporary art, and curatorial practice.

PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE & CAREGIVING

2011–2025	Care work. Raising two children (born 2000 and 2011) and primary financial provision of the family.

EDUCATION

2002–2010	Diplom, Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen "Konrad Wolf," Babelsberg (Focus: Montage (editing); wrote/directed/edited film "Sunday Menu" as final project)
1997	Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City (Intensive language course/study trip)
1995–1997	Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (Coursework: European Ethnology & Vietnamese)
1990–1991	Universität Tübingen & Universität Rostock (Exchange year)
1988–1992	BA German Studies, Russian language & literature, Brown University, USA

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS, SCREENINGS & PERFORMANCES

also credited as Alisa Lieu Anh Kottmair, Liesl Nguyen

2026	Kiều Lesen – Reading Kiều at parallelgesellschaft x Galerie Nord, Berlin. A 4-event discursive and performance series in dialogue with the Tale of Kiều
2014	Kunst als Ort der Selbstermächtigung und des Widerstands. Frauenkreise, Berlin (Group)
2011	Sunday Menu (24 min. film) Premiere: Berlinale, Culinary Cinema, Berlin
2006	Trip to Asia. Stadion X, Warsaw (Group)
2005	Video Viet Nam. GEDOK Künstlerinnenforum, Karlsruhe (Solo)
2004	Fremde Heimat Vietnam. Werkstatt der Kulturen, Berlin (Group)
2004	Psyche Offline. HFF Konrad Wolf, Babelsberg (Group)
2003	Berlin Open End. Tsatsis Projects, Thessaloniki (Group)
2002	City-Info-Boogie-Woogie. Info Offspring Kiosk, Dresden (Group)
2002	Here and Now. BüroFriedrich, Berlin (Group)
2002	layered histories. plattform in der staatsbank, Berlin (Group)
1999	used to be was. Neurotitan/Haus Schwarzenberg, Berlin (Co-curator / Group)
1999	Gap Viet Nam. Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (Group)
1998	Ceterum Censeo. Galerie am Marstall, Berlin (Group)
1998	Pavillon der Volksbühne / loop raum für aktuelle kunst, Berlin (Solo)
1996	Môt Cây, Une Arbre. Choreography: Thierry Thiêu Niang. Théâtre Contemporain de la Danse, Paris (Performance)

PRESS (SELECTION)

Christina Schwenkel, "**Vietnamese in Central Europe: An Unintended Diaspora**," Journal of Vietnamese Studies 12(1) pp. 1–9, 2017 (Discussion of Sunday Menu)

Pipo Bui, **Envisioning Vietnamese Migrants in Germany**. LIT Verlag, Münster 2003 (Cover image & discussion of Long Live Tourism! on pp. 78–80)

Susanne Altmann, "**Wiegenlied des reisenden Containers**." die Tageszeitung, 22 Oct 2002, p. 15

Blake Gopnik, "**Deutschland of Opportunity**." The Washington Post, 14 Jul 2002, pp. G1 & G4

Laura Schleussner, "Swimming in Berlin." **Link: A Critical Journal on the Arts in Baltimore & the World**, 4/2000, pp. 47–57

Birgit Hussfeld, "**Gap Viet Nam**," Art Asia Pacific, issue 25 (2000), pp. 28–30

Harald Fricke, "**Ausgelagerter Schmelztiegel**." die Tageszeitung, 31 Mar 1999

CURRENT PROJECTS

Both works in development ask similar questions across different media ecosystems: **How are Vietnamese bodies narrated – and consumed – as media? What happens when that narration is interrupted?** Their inquiry focuses on the politics of transmission: who speaks, who is spoken about, and how the script is dismantled.

Der gesendete Körper / Broadcast Bodies

2026 – in development. Granted the Berliner Recherchestipendium Bildende Kunst 2026, funding archival research toward this work.

From the Moritzburg children of the GDR to the Boat People, the so-called cigarette mafia, the racist violence of the post-reunification years, and today's figure of the "model migrant" – Vietnamese bodies recur in German public discourse, cast in turn as moral witness, object of pity, object of fear, exotic destination, proof of successful integration. The pattern may run deeper still, into 19th-century consular and missionary contact predating the Cold War.



The project draws on archival media from 1955 to the present to develop scripts for performative readings. Members of the diaspora speak these texts aloud – not as reproduced victimhood, but as media-critical estrangement.



Conceived as a video and text installation, the work uses appropriation as an analytical method: by rehearsing and re-speaking the archive, it exposes how such scripts get written, and how the diaspora has had to internalize, perform, or subvert them as a mechanism of survival within the host country.

Anatomy of an Erasure

2026 – in development. Videoessay + metal plate





AI-generated concept visualization, 2026, exploring the acid-treated plaque form for Anatomy of an Erasure.

Cẩm Nhung, a Saigon dancer in the 1960s whose disfigurement by acid attack was widely reported, survives through unstable image circulation: misattributed photographs, newspaper scans, YouTube narration, and digital rumor that bind nostalgia to collective moralizing in the Vietnamese diaspora. Carried by my mother as a warning about how a proper woman should act and the unreliability of men as protectors, the story links the the attack, ordered by a jealous wife, to older scripts of beauty, shame, and punishment.

The work consists of a desktop essay film and an acid-treated metal plate scaled to the dimensions of the photograph Cẩm Nhung reportedly wore around her neck while begging, using it as portable proof of identity, scandal, and pity. While the film tracks her image through digital circulation, the plate draws on the form of a memorial plaque to stage commemoration as unstable, building a public gesture of remembrance from circulated fragments rather than recoverable likeness.

CURRENT PROJECTS

Tracing Kiều / The Kiều Complex

Summer 2025–ongoing. A creative discursive and curatorial project with the Vietnamese diaspora.

How can a 19th-century epic illuminate contemporary perspectives on identity, movement, and belonging within the Vietnamese diaspora?

The project takes *The Tale of Kiều* (Truyện Kiều, Nguyễn Du, c. 1820) as its method – not as a story to illustrate, but as a reading tool for contemporary artistic and discursive practice. The approach is bidirectional: we approach the works through the epic's themes, and reread the epic through the artworks and texts.

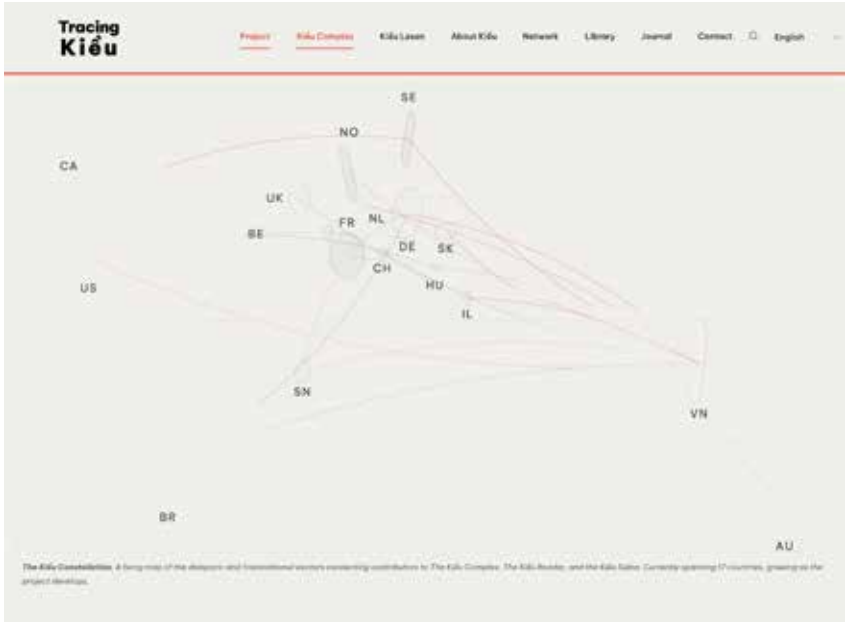


Image: Cover for The Kiều Complex exhibition concept. Graphic design: Lanh Linh Lê. Image: Claudia Borchers, Das Mädchen Kiều, 2015.

Initiated in 2025 in Berlin, the project takes different forms. Elements include:

- **The Kiều Complex,** an international contemporary art exhibition with ca. 16 artists from across the Vietnamese diaspora. In fundraising phase.
- **Kiều Salon,** an independent program of conversations, readings, and performance that opens these questions into community space, across generations and languages.
- **Kiều Lesen – Reading Kiều** is a 4-event pilot of the Kiều Salon, held at parallelgesellschaft x Galerie Nord from September–December 2026 (12.9 / 31.10 / 21.11 / 5.12.)
- **The Kieu Complex Reader,** a hybrid publication bringing together curatorial and historical texts, personal essays, short stories, and poems alongside artworks. In development.

This collaborative creative project traces how inherited stories, images, and histories travel across generations and borders – carried in some families, absent in others, rediscovered or encountered for the first time – and what artists make of what reaches them. Diasporic experience appears here not as subject matter but as a form of knowledge.





Images: Screenshots from project website and Kiều Lesen–Reading Kiều flyer.

→ tracingkieu.net

Sunday Menu

2010. 24 min, HD, German/Vietnamese with English subtitles

A quiet, elliptical narrative that follows Mi, a Vietnamese-German teenager, as she navigates generational and cross-cultural friction through the ritual of food in the anonymised suburbs of Berlin.

Sensual close-ups, body language, and a muted colour palette draw the viewer into Mi's interior world, while long shots of the sprawling gray landscape of social-housing estates underline the alienation shared by her homesick grandmother, her mother Hanh – who struggles to keep a failing restaurant afloat – and her cousin Thai, who seems to glide between German and Vietnamese milieux.

Archival photographs of the Vietnamese community in Berlin anchor the family's private tensions in a broader sociopolitical context; minimal, stilted dialogue exposes the limits and ambivalence of cultural translation.

Inspired by Pham Thi Hoai's short story, *Thực đơn Chủ nhật, Sunday Menu* is the first installment of the projected *Stories of Kieu* trilogy, which maps diasporic Vietnamese life across three European cities.

It was my final project at the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen "Konrad Wolf" in Babelsberg, and premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) in 2011 in the Culinary Cinema section.

→ see trailer





Writer & Director as Liesl Nguyen; **Editor** as Alisa Lieu Anh Kotmair
Camera: Marco Armborst
Sound: Gregor Bonse
Production: Julia Terrey
Producer: HFF "Konrad Wolf"
Cast:
Mi: Hong Berghof
Bà: Nguyen Thi Quyet Thang
Hanh (Mi's mother): Dam Ngoc Van
Thai (cousin): Nguyen Van Martin Huy
Merchants of Dong Xuan Center as themselves
Cherry Blossom Man: Nathan Duc Köstlin
Prologue and Epilogue Voiceover:
Minh Khai Phan Thi





If the Walls Were to Have Ears

1999

This project explores the architectural and social afterlife of a former East Berlin dormitory on Rhinstrasse, which housed Vietnamese contract workers before and after reunification.

Part 1: Photo Series

Medium-format color photographs document the abandoned dormitory in Lichtenberg. Having volunteered in the mid-90s with Reistrommel e. V. – a nonprofit supporting contract workers on this very site – I witnessed its former vibrancy: communal kitchens, family gatherings, and daily life existing between two worlds. Returning in 1999 to find the complex emptied, these photographs treat peeling paint and empty rooms as tangible traces of a disappearing history.

Part 2: Installation

As an iteration of this inquiry, the installation transforms these architectural remnants into an embodied, sensory space. Suspended pressboard squares are mounted with salvaged fragments – wallpaper, notices, and posters – recovered from the Rhinstrasse site. In front, four low plastic stools, characteristic of street settings in Vietnam, are fixed to the floor, each with headphones playing a Vietnamese language course. By forcing the viewer to adopt a low, uncomfortable posture and withholding immediate narrative access, the work demands active physical engagement, suggesting that understanding these spaces requires the labor of translation.







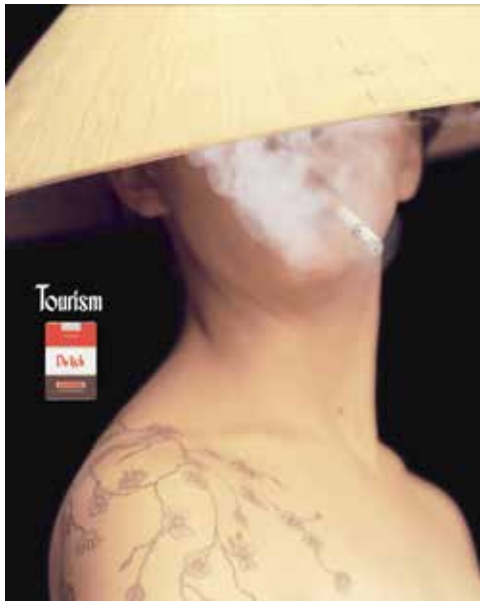




Long Live Tourism! Cigarette Campaign

1998–2000. Photography, video, and performative intervention

A three-part fictive advertising campaign and performative intervention centered around “Du Lịch” (Vietnamese for “Tourism”) cigarettes. The work responds to the post-Wall marginalization of former Vietnamese contract workers (Vertragsarbeiter) who turned to contraband cigarette sales for survival. Operating from my liminal position as an Amerasian of Vietnamese descent, I use my body to mimic racialized tropes. The title operates on multiple critical levels: it points to the socio-economic realities of the diaspora while acknowledging my own complicity and privilege as a cultural tourist – both consuming the “exotic” in Vietnam, and observing this highly specific East German-Vietnamese history from the outside.





Part 1: Color Posters

Appropriating the visual language of commercial advertising, I embody an anonymous, exoticized figure, smoking. By transforming a stigmatized act of survival into an object of consumer desire, the work exposes the Western packaging of the Asian female body.

Part 2: Black & White Photos





Shot against a former East German Plattenbau on Berlin’s Rhinstrasse – a historical dormitory for contract workers – these photographs shift into a documentary aesthetic. By physically inserting myself into the courtyard to wait and smoke, I deliberately blur auto-fiction with historical reality, questioning the ethics of representing a marginalized struggle that is not entirely my own.

Part 3: Passive Intervention Observed (Cigarette Diary)

Translating these poses into a public performance, I stood anonymously at various locations across Berlin, embodying the ubiquitous yet socially invisible cigarette seller. Distilled into a 9-minute video essay, the intervention captures the real-time reactions of the urban public and the friction of the performing body in contested space.









→ see excerpt

El Mundo Maravilloso del Arroz

1998. An investigation into the performance of identity, cultural heritage, and the politics of representation.

Part 1: Self-Portraits with Rice

Using the formal rigors of medium-format black-and-white photography, this series stages my body alongside various rice products to navigate the performance of cultural heritage.

By positioning the self as a site of construction, I explore how cultural symbols are mediated and assigned meaning. These photographs function as an early inquiry into the visual codes of the diaspora, treating the “staple” as a subversive prop to dismantle the notion of an “authentic” self.



Part 2: Litany

This 6-minute loop juxtaposes magnified, tactile visuals of rice on skin with a rhythmic, stream-of-consciousness recitation of rice-based products.

The work probes the sensory boundaries between consumption and intimacy, objectification and identity. The Spanish title – a language of limited proficiency for me – serves as a performative act of distancing; by using an exoticized lens to frame my own heritage, I reflect on the irony of appropriation and the instability of cultural signs.

→ see excerpt



Laundry Days

1998. Volksbühne Pavilion, Berlin

A “living installation” that transformed the Volksbühne Pavilion into a hybrid salon and performative site of encounter.

By curating Vietnamese cultural artifacts – food, music, documentary film, and field recordings from my own travels – I symbolically “aired” the complex, often contradictory narratives of the Vietnamese diaspora in Germany.

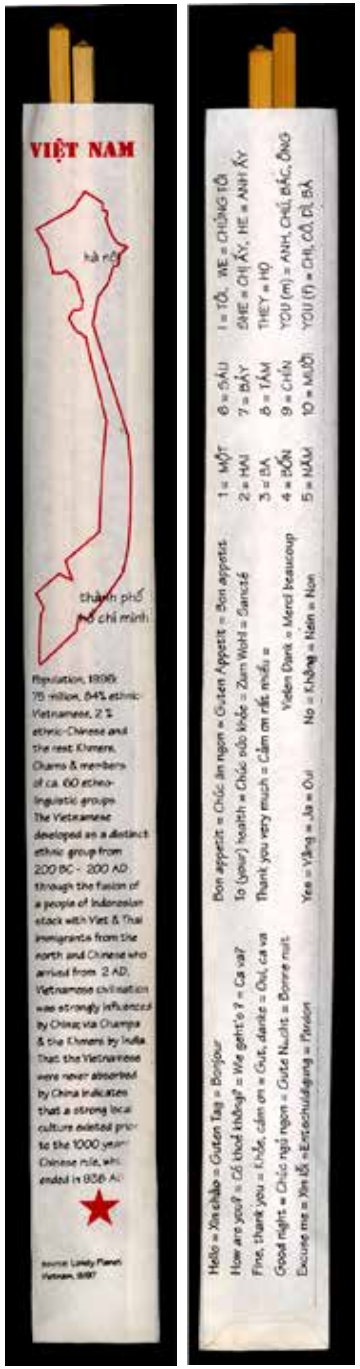
Functioning as a space for public discourse rather than a static display, the project established a foundational inquiry into the insider/outsider dichotomy and the fluid nature of self-representation that continues to drive my practice.











Long Live Tourism – Useful Souvenirs: Chopstick Bags

1998. Hanoi, Berlin

Born from my frustration with the language barrier during my time in Vietnam, this project repurposed the standard disposable chopstick wrapper into a subversive tool for cultural engagement.

Each bag featured a map of Vietnam, demographic data, and a multilingual phrase guide.

Distributed in eateries in Hanoi and Berlin, these “useful souvenirs” acted as an intervention in the consumption of “the exotic,” exposing the irony of culinary appropriation versus genuine linguistic exchange.

By inserting this object into the routine of communal dining, I interrogated my own role as both participant and perennial outsider.

By the Ocean

2004. 3-channel video installation

by the ocean maps the unstable terrain of memory and desire. Arranged in a Z-formation, the installation acts as a photographic triptych – a meditation on nostalgia and the poetics of suspended time.

By utilizing an asynchronous loop of three distinct voices, the work fractures linear narrative, allowing recollections to collide in unpredictable, layered cycles.

The installation serves as a liminal site where absence and presence converge, positioning the viewer within a transient, immersive state of subjective recollection.

With dancers Howard Katz and Elizabeth Williams. **→ see excerpt**



Trip Takes

2000–2001. Audio CD and video.

The source material for Trip Takes is audio and video recorded during a journey by land – train, sometimes bus – from Berlin to Hanoi. Working from tape, I reconstructed the journey through layered, deliberately degraded generations of sound and image: each "take" is a recording remembering an earlier recording, looped and reprocessed until the original recedes. Playback itself is randomized – the tracks and scenes have no fixed order.

The work treats memory itself as a process of transmission and loss – each generation confirming the previous one's value even as it moves further from it. This early inquiry into the instability of the "original" runs through my practice more broadly.

Audio: 6 tracks, 54 min. total. Video: 4–20 looped scenes, shuffled play, shown on multiple monitors or projected.



(in dieser stadt)

2002. Single-channel video, 3:16 min. loop

A 14-part self-choir performs an a cappella version of Hildegard Knef's 1965 chanson, "In dieser Stadt," a song about nostalgia and estrangement from one's hometown.

By layering my voice into an uncanny mimicry of this iconic German performer, the work juxtaposes the native's reflective alienation with the migrant's experience of persistent foreignness.

Train landscapes between Germany and China and the video's continuous loop reinforce the cyclical, unending sense of displacement and the unstable nature of "home."

Collaboration with Stefan Zeyen.

→ see video

Sing Along with Art and Culture: Karaoke World / Relax & Tired

2002. Video, 2 versions (2:35 / 2:36 min.)

This work excerpts Malcolm McLaren's text "The Casino of Authenticity and Karaoke" (1999) and forces it through karaoke itself – synced to midi versions of "Relax" (Frankie Goes to Hollywood) and "I'm So Tired!" (The Beatles), highlighted for the viewer to sing along.

Using karaoke's own logic of borrowed voice and mechanical reproduction, the piece stages a text about authenticity inside the very apparatus that undoes it: speaking through a borrowed form to unsettle it.

→ see excerpt







